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January 2007

Volume 20 Number 01

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Editorial

The year computing changed forever – again

Happy New Year!

It's become something of a tradition this time of year for tech editors to gaze into the crystal ball and speculate about the wonderful techno future that's just around the corner. The latest 'n' greatest isn't always all that ground-breaking, but 2007 shows some promise that we'll look back and say, "a lot changed that year."

The long-anticipated Windows Vista will soon be on retail store shelves and preloaded in new PCs (the business launch of Vista has already happened, the consumer launch takes place at the end of January). The most publicized parts of Vista so far are enhanced security and the Aero transparent interface. Overall performance should be better because of improvements to many of the underpinnings like DirectX, the colour engine, and so on. We'll pick up the pace on our Vista coverage in the coming months.

In the first half of the year, Apple will be launching a new version of OSX too. This one will come with Boot Camp, allowing you to install Windows on a Mac. If you say it fast, it sounds like the best of both worlds, but beyond the novelty of having access to both environments from a common hardware platform, I wonder how many people will do real work across both platforms. Popular applications like Microsoft Office, Adobe Creative Suite, QuickTime, Flash and many others are available on both platforms with mostly trouble-free file compatibility. There are applications that are just available on one or the other, but often they are aimed at a particular user niche. Generally, working on one platform or another isn't as restrictive as it once was.

However, one of the practical barriers that you don't hear too much about is the fact that the file systems used by OSX and Windows XP are not compatible. OSX can read but not write to NTFS, the preferred environment for XP. There is a way around this: creating a FAT32 partition, which is the lowest common denominator for cross platform read-write. But does anyone else see the irony of reaching back to a superseded file system to achieve détente between two modern operating systems?

There is a fresher common denominator for the two OSes, as well – the hardware platform. All of Apple's lines now run on Intel processors – and all multi-core at that. PC makers may still have single-processor boxes in inventory, but going forward multi-core will be mainstream. At one time, it was a badge of honour to pay extra for the privilege of owning a Mac, but these days you can get a Core2Duo-powered iMac or MacBook for under $1,000 or $1,500 respectively. That's very competitive with comparable PC hardware. Don't think for a moment that PC makers are going to let Macs gain a reputation as price leaders, though; instead, expect to see some excellent performance from dual core PCs priced well below $1,000. We will look back on 2007 as the year that mainstream computing became multi-core. And once we have it, we'll wonder how we lived without it.

The first big tech event in 2007 is the Consumer Electronics Show. CES has become the must-attend show for HUB: DL. The products announced and shown there are the meat and potatoes of what we like to write about – and hopefully what you like to read about. CES 2007 takes place the second week in January and I'll be heading there for a few days. A show report will be in next month's issue.

My business travel has been an ongoing experiment in mobile computing for a number of years, and this trip will be no different. Since I'm now using a Blackberry Pearl I want to once more revisit the limits of digital minimalism, so I won't be packing a notebook computer or a camera or Palm organizer. Just the Pearl. Pray for my soul.

Enjoy the issue,
David Tanaka
Editor-in-Chief

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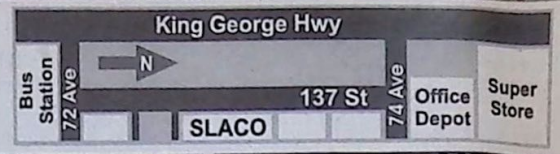

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Organize, organize

If you've been promising yourself to get a handle on that ever-growing collection of digital images, now's as good a time as any to start. You can just add it to the list of New Year's resolutions you've already made.

Digital cameras make it entirely too easy to amass huge collections of images – good as well as bad. Camera utilities, the computer operating system itself, and photo editing programs all offer (or impose?) their own way of downloading images to the computer. Each uses a different system to label the folders and probably puts them in different locations on your hard drive too. They generally don't talk to each other either, so one won't automatically know where the other put the photos. After several months, finding a specific image can turn into a nightmare.

The best way to avoid this is to use one set of tools and stick with it. This allows you to develop one consistent way to download images that becomes so familiar and predictable that you don't have to give it a second thought.

Camera makers most often include a software bundle with a new camera. Typically, this includes a downloading utility, cataloguing software and an image editor. If these aren't to your liking (often they are quite basic and you may soon outgrow them), you can go with a popular and inexpensive image editor like Adobe Photoshop Elements or Corel Paint Shop Pro, which have the same three bits – image editor, catalogue and download utility. Products sold primarily as image cataloguers, such as ACDSee now also include image adjustment tools, so that's another route to take.

The download utility and catalogue software often work together, the downloader taking care of the physical process of moving files from camera to computer, with the catalogue creating an electronic filing system for your images. Some catalogues also allow you to batch process a number of images, which is a great time saver. Some batch utilities are batch resizing, which allows

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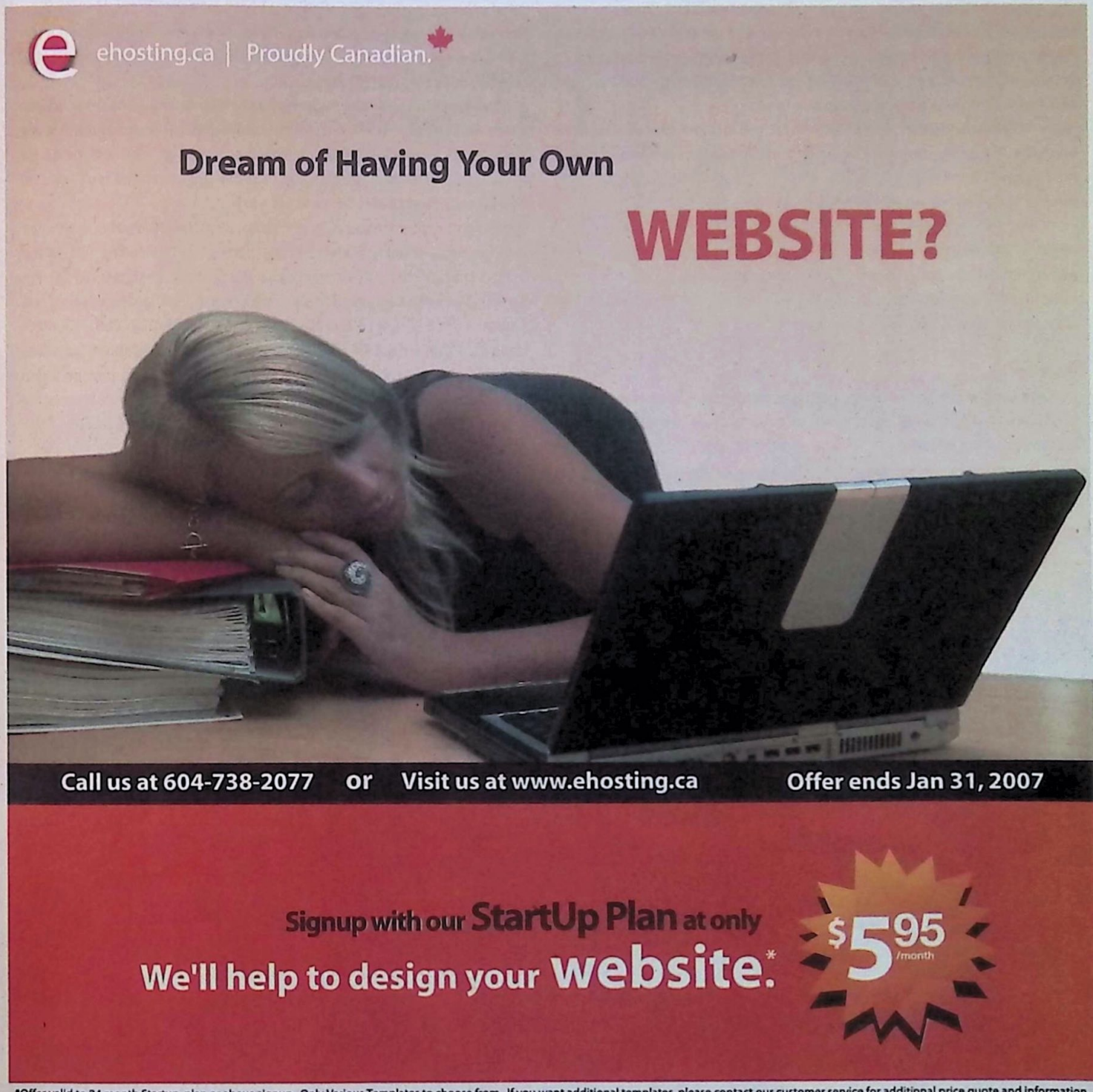
you to take a bunch of images from your six megapixel camera and scale them down to an email-friendly size; and batch renaming, which allows you to give a set of images a common root name, such as "Greece vacation."

While you may want to for your own reasons, it is not necessary to rename the actual file because catalogues also come with powerful organizing tools that allow you write descriptions or attach keywords, rankings or colour codes to each image in the collection and then find them that way. Hence, if you wrote "Greece vacation" in a description field, you'd be able to quickly find the image by performing a search, even though the actual file name might be something like DSC0043.

You may eventually encounter a situation where you have so many images in the same category that finding a specific one becomes a challenge. This is where rankings, colour codes and other qualitative information can come in handy. You can further refine your collection by ranking the images – giving it a number usually between one and five, a star rating or a colour code, for example. Once you have this second piece of information, you can combine them to conduct Boolean searches to find only the "Greece vacation" images that have five stars, for example.

By David Tanaka



DV, or Not DV

Spy vs. Spy - Sneaking Up on Digital Video

Spy vs. Spy is more than the name of my all-time favourite part of Mad Magazine. The black and white comic strip was created in the 1960s by Antonio Prohias – he's Cuban, so that ought to tell you something about his experience with the subject matter.

It's humour was in perfect counterpoint to the seriousness of the Cold War, and the two principals' increasingly sophisticated and ingenious methods of outdoing each other is oddly-reminiscent of today's big, booming technology industry.

By happy coincidence, Spy vs. Spy is also the name of a Canadian store selling surveillance, counter-surveillance and related video security equipment, filled with its own sophisticated and ingenious technologies. Of course, it's not the only such store; in fact, both surveillance for the home and the workplace is a big, booming business.

And therein lies the rub: many of the latest spy, surveillance and security products are being described using the same terms that videographers, media producers and DV columnists use, even though the technologies they refer to are often not even remotely similar.

I've even had some people ask me if such-and-such a surveillance product might be just as good when shooting video, or while working in the DV edit suite, because they often seem so much cheaper to buy.

Like my surreptitious cartoon characters often do, I'm here to toss a lit stick of dynamite on some of those notions.

HD or not HD

Let me start with high definition, a phrase that certainly is causing enough confusion in the marketplace, even without guys in trench coats and fedoras mucking about!

Resolution is one way we refer to how detailed a picture is. In video, one measurement to look for is horizontal TV lines (TVL). A normal CCTV picture is around 300 to 400 TVL; VHS or S-VHS images go up to 480 or so; high definition digital video is rated at 720 or 1080 (for now).

Nevertheless, several of the surveillance and CCTV cameras I have checked out lately refer to themselves as "high resolution." Now, I figure a good clear image is always useful for security purposes, but this really sounded like overkill to me. Sure enough, checking the specs of these fixed position cameras, they delivered nothing close to what we have previously described in this column as true high definition.

One security camera so billed actually spec'ed out at 320 lines, not even close to the old analog, NTSC, TV signal specification – and much, much less the 1080 lines that real HD tops out at.

Another camera promising high resolution was actually a quarter-screen format – and black and white at that! Of course, real HD-philes know that the North American digital television specification says high def must be widescreen, in the 16:9 aspect ratio (not the square-ish 4:3 we – and all security cameras I could find – are used to).

Speaking of resolutions and aspect ratios, anyone looking at surveillance video products should be aware of the potentially misleading use of the terms, especially if you are coming at them from the world of DV. For example, I've seen some products in which "resolution" is described as one or more of the following: 352x240, 704x240, 704x480, 352x288, 704x288, 704x576. I think most of you will recognize those descriptors as video format or screen sizes, not resolution settings. The terms provide video display size with dimensions in pixels, which is not the same as measuring a picture's resolution in horizontal lines (480, 720, 1080, and so on).

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DV or not DV

Many surveillance camera and recorder manufacturers also regularly speak of "digital video." Luckily, they do not (that I have seen) misuse the more formal "DV" when doing so.

DV, of course, is the formal name or acronym that refers to specific criteria under which video is compressed and digitized. We've talked about what DV the formal – as opposed to digital video the generic – is in previous issues of HUB:DL (and we will probably do so again).

While it is safe to refer to incoming video that is digitized as "digital video," people used to DV, Mini DV even HDV will want to check the bona fides of any such description carefully. Many surveillance products use compression schemes other than DV, so the video may not be compatible on an editing timeline or playback device.

Depending on the manufacturer, the fairly well-known MPEG-4 compression format might be used. Others may use Wavelet compression, a good but rather obscure technology. Others refer to Motion-JPEG, which to be honest I thought went out of fashion a few years ago, but still seems to be in use in some circles. DV compression is fixed at 5:1; wavelet is variable, and can run to 32:1 (such as used in HDV). Motion-JPEG is a weird hybrid of its own, originally designed to compress still images.

Frames Outstanding in the Field

When a reader asked about the extended record times he had heard were available with VCRs and DVRs, I was taken aback for a moment. With a DVR (digital video recorder), adding record time can be as easy as adding hard drive space. But with a VCR (videocassette recorder), I did not immediately decode what would extend the available record time (beyond the T-160 tapes currently on the market).

But sure enough, the surveillance people have some tricks up their sleeve, and some asterisks attached to their claims. Time lapse is the big one, and with that approach, yes, some recorders can be set to record in different modes that capture up to 1280 hours of video before a tape change is required.

"Full motion," what you see on TV (and on Mini DV tapes) is 30 frames per second (or fps). Most security systems record at slower rates, resulting in those jerky, stuttery-looking images, but saving on tape or hard drive space.

But, by definition, time-lapse video is not real-time video, and is not what any home or pro videographer really wants to see on his or her screen. It's achieved using a couple of tricks of the trade, including downsizing the video image size (see those numbers above for approximate pixel counts on a quarter screen video window, for example, which can be recorded roughly four times longer than a full size image.

Of course, time in a time-lapse recording is highly condensed, and that's where a lot of extra record times come from. By capturing, say, only 15 frames per second (as opposed to the normal 30), twice as much capacity results. A surveillance recorder that is set to capture one frame per second might not see much real motion, but it will see lots of extra record time. Time-lapse recorders can also play with the actual resolution (be it horizontal lines) or data stream (in the case of DVRs), so as to reduce the amount of information they have to store (of course, the trade-off in all cases is video quality, clarity and real-time capabilities).

DVRs digitally record to an internal hard drive instead of tape, and so can be used to continuously record for days or weeks at a time. Some systems automatically delete (or actually write over) the oldest video on the system in order to recycle and extend recording capabilities. Ironically, I have seen some system providers say to the effect that "We'll supply a CD drive so you can back up your older video."

Ha, ha – such jokers, those spies are! Anyone familiar with digital video knows the gap between CD capacity (what, 650 MB?) and large hard drive capacity (gee, how about my 250 GB drive!) cannot be easily bridged!

Since the video images are stored digitally, hard drive-recorded image quality won't necessarily degrade over time, unlike multi-generation tape recordings. That's if it is kept at the same compression settings, qualities and data rates throughout its life. Changing digital video's compression is called concatenation, and it can be just as dangerous to digital video as multi-generations are to analog video (but in different ways, of course).

So describing the quality of a hard drive digital video recording in the security world is a major challenge. I've seen one hard drive video recorder describe size requirements thus: "One camera recording in real-time uses one GB/day." Another manufacturer states, "Picture quality can be selected from different file sizes, ranging from a standard picture quality file size of 16KB to a high picture quality file size of 64KB." Without a calculator at hand, I defy anyone to determine how much hard drive space they would need, using such descriptors, for a five minute edited hip-hop video!

All this is not to say you cannot get there from here – certainly there are ways to use "surveillance video" in "digital video" productions. But be very, very wary if some suspicious character wants you to go the other way, and use "surveillance video" gear for a "digital video" production.

That's a truly dangerous game!

By Lee Rickwood

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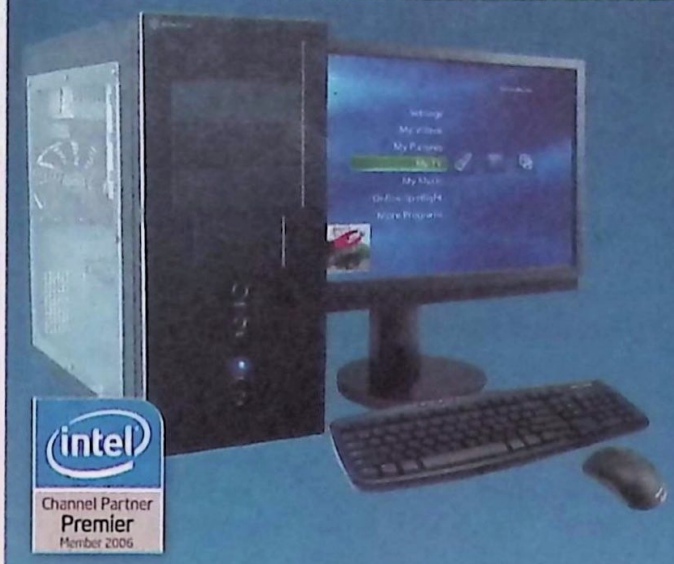

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Make a Movie Slide Show

Create a movie slideshow with Windows Movie Maker 2.1

I just moved into a new house and to share the event with family overseas, I created a movie slide show. It's a simple enough project that you can finish in an hour or two.

Launch Windows Movie Maker and choose File, Import into Collections and select the images to use for your slide show. If desired, you can also import short movie clips - Windows Movie Maker can handle movies and still images.

The timeline across the foot of the screen is where you assemble your slide show. To do this, drag the images from a collection and drop them onto the timeline. Drag them to arrange them into the desired order. By default, still images display for five seconds each. To change this default value, choose Tools, Options, Advanced tab and alter the Picture Duration value. Do this before you drag images from a collection onto the video timeline and the length will apply to them all. To change the time a single photo displays for, click it in the timeline and adjust its right-hand handle so it plays for a longer or shorter time.

You can add transitions between images so that the movement from one to the next is more attractive. To do this, choose Tools, Video Transitions and drag and drop a transition into the space between two images – you can have only one transition per movement from one picture to the next.

You can also use effects to change the look of a photo. Choose Tools, Video Effect and preview the effects. To add an effect, drag and drop it onto the photo on the timeline. You can combine effects, provided they don't conflict with each other. You can also add an effect multiple times, such as the Ease In effect, to make the zoom more pronounced.

To play music as the slide shows plays, import the music into a collection by choosing File, Import into Collections, locate the track to import and click Import. When you're done, drag and drop it onto the Audio/Music track in the timeline.

In many cases, you may prefer to narrate your slide show rather than play music. In this case, choose Tools, Narrate Timeline and select the options from the dialog. Click Start Narration and speak as the slide show plays. When you're done, click the Stop Narration button and type a name for the narration audio file and click Save. Click Done to return to the main program window and you'll see the audio file appear on the audio timeline.

To add an introduction and other titles to the movie, choose Tools, Titles and Credits and select where the title should appear.

To view the slide show, click at the beginning of the timeline and press the Play button under the preview screen. If all is in order, save your project by choosing File, Save Project. You'll need this saved file if you edit the movie at a later date. Then, to make the movie, choose File, Save Movie File and select how you want to distribute the movie – you can make multiple movies for different purposes, for example make a low resolution, highly compressed version for emailing and a larger version for burning to CD.

By Helen Bradley

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Putting your presentation on the big screen

Multimedia projectors

Sure, you can crowd clients around your notebook screen for that million-dollar presentation, or show off your latest photos or videos on a cell phone or iPod. To make an impact though, you need to show big, and one of the best ways to do that is with a digital projector.

Digital projectors have been around for ages, but in lockstep with the convergence of consumer electronics and computers, they have evolved from being mainly a business or educational tool into another cool device for your digital life. This article will concentrate on business projectors, often referred to as multimedia projectors. They are old school, designed primarily to accept video signals from a computer through an analogue or digital monitor port, although most now also have ports for other devices like video players. The newer kid on the block is the home theatre projector – similar underlying projection technology but with enhancements to make it get along better in a home entertainment environment. See "Big pictures never looked so good" elsewhere in this issue for the lowdown on home theatre projectors.

Even though business projectors mostly do PowerPoints and such, you can use them within a home theatre environment, projecting DVD movies or TV. With photography being now mainly digital, the digital projector has also become today's version of the 35 mm slide projector. And one of the benefits of business projectors is that you can buy models specifically designed to be carted around. That means they are bright enough for a variety of environments, compact and don't weigh too much. For road shows, size and weight do matter.

For this roundup, I was looking at a few key dimensions. I wanted a portable projector that was relatively affordable – around $1,500 and certainly no more than $2000. I wanted XGA (1024 x 768 pixel) native resolution, and around 1500 lumens of brightness. Epson, Lenovo and Toshiba answered the challenge with three fine examples.

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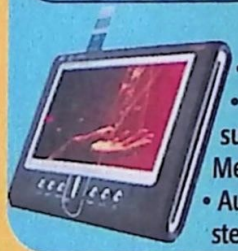
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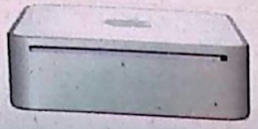

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They come similarly equipped with all the necessary cables and a sturdy carrying bag. Setting them up was hardly a challenge: plug the unit in, connect the cable to the notebook computer's monitor port and set its display to presentation mode. They are all bright enough to project a two-metre wide image in my living room during the day without having to draw the curtains. I tried a few different kinds of content, all run through my notebook computer. This included a basic PowerPoint presentation, a photographic slideshow generated in ProShow Gold, a couple of DVD movies and some cable TV run through an ATI TVWonder USB 2.0 device.

The biggest limitation of business projectors in playing rich media content is the sound subsystem. You can use the notebook's speakers or go through the projector's audio, but the aural experience won't be exactly what you'd call theatre quality. They certainly won't do justice to the rich audio found on most DVD movies. I plugged in some portable Edifier speakers I still had from last month's review, and this improved the sound considerably.

Epson PowerLite 1700c

Price: $1599 (SRP and Street, this relatively new unit isn't being discounted much yet)
Weight: 1.6 kg
Projection technology: 3-LCD
Native resolution: 1024 x 768
Brightness: 2200 lumens
Contrast ratio: 400:1

This new model from Epson is the smallest, lightest as well as the most expensive of the three but performs admirably. Because it was smaller than the other two, I found myself reaching for it first when I had to make a presentation to a small group of people on a couple of occasions.

But the small package performs big time. This was a very satisfying unit, and the very good performance belies its small packaging.

Lenovo ThinkVision E500

Price: $1249 (under $1000 on the street)
Weight: 2.4 kg
Projection technology: DLP
Native resolution: 800x600
Brightness: 1600 lumens
Contrast ratio: 2000:1

I had asked for models with a minimum of XGA (1024 x 768) native resolution, and the E500 misses that, being natively SVGA (800x600). The M500 would have been a better fit, but it is a different design despite the similarity of the model designation.

With that qualification in mind, the E500 is actually a decent performer, what you'd expect from an entry-level product from a brand name manufacturer. It's basically plug and play and performs very well within its envelope. While native resolution is 800x600, it will pump 1024x768 that is still very clear. And the underlying contrast superiority of DLP over LCD is the reason why the E500 can boast a contrast ratio of 2000:1, while the other two, LCD based offer 400:1.

Toshiba TLP-X2000

Price: $1,100-$1,300 (street)
Native resolution: 1024 x 768
Brightness: 2000 lumens
Contrast Ratio: 400:1
Weight: 2.8 kg

The Toshiba is a fine unit, around the same price as the Lenovo, but with display specs closer to the more expensive Epson. The Toshiba is quite a bit bulkier and weighs twice as much as the Epson too, although 2.8 kg still isn't too arm-stretching. Like the Epson, it has an attractive design that makes it look more like a consumer electronics device than a business appliance.

Comparing the Toshiba and Epson units is a study in what you can expect to pay for portability. The two are relatively close in specs – the brightness ratings are close (Epson is rated slightly brighter), and both use a three-LCD imaging system. But if you shop around, you may be able to save a few hundred dollars on the bulkier and heavier Toshiba unit.

By David Tanaka

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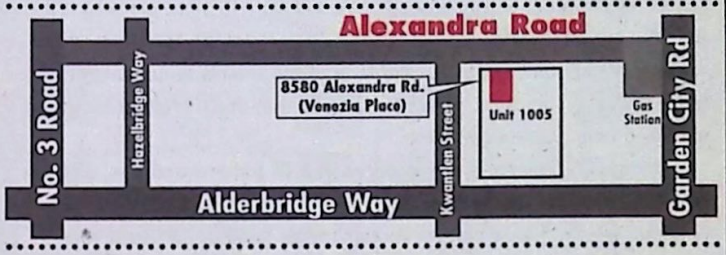

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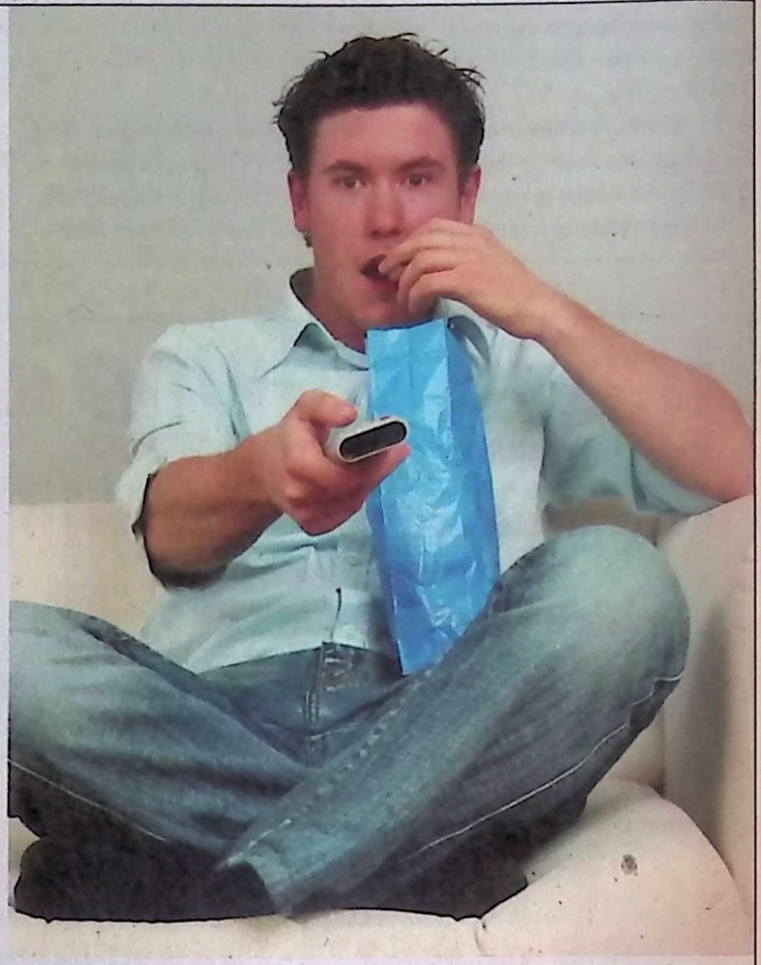
Home theatre projectors

When it comes to display technologies, nothing comes close to projectors for price-per-inch value. And with high-definition making its way into projection technology, and HD-DVD, Blu-Ray and HD gaming making their way into homes, the blown-up images home theatre projectors produce have never looked better. As with most things technology-related, however, choosing the correct projector requires time, a bit of research and knowing what to look for.



Things to consider

Two important considerations when contemplating a home theatre projector are the size of the room and the ambient light conditions during your primary viewing times. If the room is too small to allow for a decent-sized projection, maybe projectors shouldn't be your first choice. At the other extreme, projectors will work in most rooms you'll find in a typical house, so unless you live in a palace, too big a room won't generally be a problem. Similarly, if the room's ambient light is relatively high, the projector will have to be that much brighter for you to have an enjoyable experience.

Brightness in projectors is measured in ANSI lumens and this, along with the contrast ratio, will give you some clues about whether or not a projector will produce a vibrant enough image for your particular room. Generally, 750 ANSI Lumens and 1000:1 contrast ratio are perfectly suitable for a room with completely controllable lighting conditions, while 1000 ANSI Lumens (or higher) would be required for brighter areas. Usually, the brighter units are more expensive.

Most home theatre projectors have a 16:9 native aspect ratio ("native" being the key word). This is one of the major differences between home theatre projectors and business units, which have a 4:3 aspect ratio to match traditional PC monitors as well as standard TV. There is nothing technically wrong with either ratio, and both types of projectors will display either aspect. But for home theatre, you'll be happier with native 16:9 because image quality will be better for all the wide-screen content (DVD/HD movies, video game consoles, etc.) that is fast becoming the norm.

Resolution is another tricky area with projectors. While most home theatre projectors claim they are "HD compatible," that does not mean they are HD ready. Sure they may be able to accept any/all of the different HD resolutions, but internally it is scaled to the native resolution of the unit (which can cause artefacts.) When dealing with a 16:9 aspect ratio, the resolution will be in three flavours – 480p, 720p, and 1080p. While 1080p native resolution projectors are available, even the cheapest units are $5000. When it comes to resolution, like aspect ratio, you're looking for the native resolution and not just what's "supported."

In order to display the image with the highest quality, you're also going to want the best connection possible. While composite, s-video, SVGA and component are standard inputs on most projectors, a digital connection like

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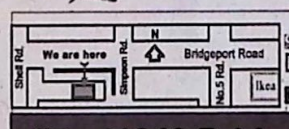

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DVI with HDCP or HDMI is ideal. Fortunately, wide screen home theatre projectors usually have one or the other, so figuring out which of the two you plan on using (if at all) is beneficial when purchasing your unit (that said, there are DVI-to-HDMI adapters.)

Lastly, very common and often overlooked aspects of owning a home theatre projection setup are the intrinsic costs involved with operation. For instance, if you don't have a (preferably white) wall that's smooth enough to offer a worthwhile picture, you'll most likely want to invest in a projector screen, which can set you back an additional $350-$500. Furthermore, the lamp life of front projectors is substantially shorter than CRT, LCD, Plasma or even rear projection TVs. Whereas those sets last for approximately 10,000 to 20,000 hours (even longer for CRTs), projector bulbs usually last around 2,000 to 3,000 hours (less if you need to max out the brightness). With an average cost of $400, you could end up spending quite a few additional dollars on replacement lamps, depending on how often and how long you use your home theatre.

Despite having to figure out the puzzle-like requirements for your specific setup, there are plenty of perks to having a home theatre projector. The obvious benefits include a massive screen, portability (compared to even small TVs) and affordable price, but probably the best attribute of owning a projector for entertainment is that it gives you a true theatrical experience in the comfort of your own home.

A Quick Comparison

Mitsubishi HD1000U DLP Projector
Price: Less than $1300
Native Resolution: 1280x720 (720p)
Aspect Ratio: 16x9
Brightness: 1500 Lumens
Contrast Ratio: 2500:1
Lamp-Life: 2000-3000 hours

Supporting 720p native resolution with a relatively high lumens and contrast ratio means the HD1000U will offer a decent picture in most light conditions, and regardless of whether or not the screen size is maximized. Coming complete with HDMI and SP/DIF audio connections means the HD1000U can be connected to the latest HD devices right out of the box. Unfortunately, all of these features don't come free, as the Mitsubishi HD1000U is a pricey unit.

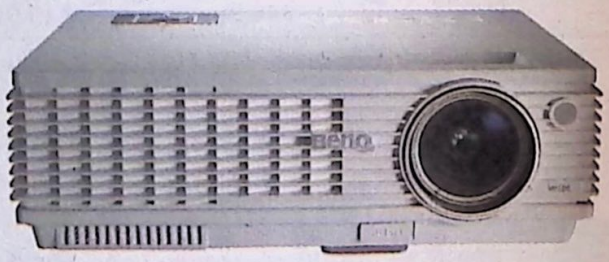
BenQ W100
Price: Less than $900
Native Resolution: 854x480 (480p)
Aspect Ratio: 16x9
Brightness: 1300 Lumens
Contrast Ratio: 2500:1
Lamp Life: 3000-4000 Hours.

The BenQ W100 has a contrast ratio and brightness values almost equivalent to the more expensive HD1000U. Furthermore, it has a lamp life of 3000-4000 hours, which is substantially longer than the average. Alas, these great specifications come at the cost of the W100's native resolution, which is a paltry 854x480. However, if you're planning to set up your system in a naturally bright room (lots of windows) or you're using your home theatre for everyday use and not just movies, the W100 might save you even more money in the long run.

InFocus Play Big IN72
Price: Less than $1300
Native Resolution: 854x480 (480p)
Aspect Ratio: 16x9
Brightness: 900 Lumens
Contrast Ratio: 2000:1
Lamp Life: 3000 Hours

While the IN72 is in the same price bracket as Mitsubishi's HD1000U, it offers less lumens and contrast ratio than both the Mitsubishi and BenQ units. As well, the native resolution of the IN72 is a mere 854x480 – matching the BenQ, but again, at an elevated price. So, who would want to purchase a projector with lower specs at a higher price? Those who also factor in the quality of the design. The IN72 is a very good-looking machine, by far the most attractive of the three. And when it comes to inputs, the IN72 does not disappoint: M1 (which can accept either a digital or an analog signal and fully supports DVI), HDMI, S-video, composite, and three RCA jacks (for standard component video).

By Mike Palermo



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Moving to Mac

Back it up!

A crashed Mac can break your heart

The most tragic computer tales out there are generally the ones where someone has lost a few years' worth of data in a hard drive crash. The cost can be enormous, both financially and psychologically.

But no matter how many tales of woe we hear, most of us still can't be bothered to back up the data on our own computers. And if you thought you were safe because you're on a Mac, think again. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: back up, back up, back up!

There are a two schools of thought on backup:

1) Just back up the files that will be costly (or hard) to replace.

Everyone has a lot of files on their computer that are not easily replaceable if they get munched up in a hard drive crash, like personal documents, digital photos and music that's been purchased online. At the very least, these are the files you'll want to back up. The advantage to this method is that it can be fairly quick and easy. If you have an external hard drive, you need only plug it in, wait for it to mount, and then drag the Documents, Music, Movies and Pictures folders to your external drive.

The downside is that if your hard drive gets corrupted, you'll have to spend a fair amount of time reinstalling the operating system, then some more time reinstalling the applications. This is especially painful with programs like Adobe's PhotoShop, which requires you to "de-authorize" it before you can install it on another machine. Obviously, in the case of a hard drive crash, you won't have had the opportunity to de-authorize the software; unfortunately, that means you'll probably have to spend some time on the phone convincing the software company that you should be allowed to reinstall the software. Usually companies are pretty good about this, but the administrative hassle is definitely an annoyance.

2) Back it up...back it ALL up!

Following a crash, if you want to be able to recover your system and carry on as if nothing happened, you'll want to back everything up – including your applications and operating system – so that you have an exact snapshot of your hard drive. That way, if you ever run into a problem, it's theoretically as simple as putting all the backed-up data onto a new hard drive, and then moving on with your life.

The downside, of course, is that it can be a very time-consuming process copying absolutely everything over to external media. And for a full system backup, you'll want to use a special software package designed to copy over all your system files – as with Windows, there are a good number of protected files that you can't just drag and drop onto an external drive. While there are free files available for data backup, I typically recommend spending the money on a program called SuperDuper!, which makes the backup process quick, easy and reliable.

Backup programs

There are a number of good programs out there that will help you back up your files, and you should be able to locate them easily with a trip to www.versiontracker.com.

LaCie SilverKeeper

Freeware

If you're on a budget, it's pretty hard to argue with a free download from one of the big names in external Mac-compatible hard drives. SilverKeeper is one of the products that LaCie bundles with their drives, but you can also use it with drives from other manufacturers. It's a bit slow, but hey - it's free.

Carbon Copy Cloner

Shareware - US$5

Designed to create a clone of a hard drive, CCC also works as a full-disk backup. There are apparently a few issues if you're running a version of Tiger before v10.4.2, but once you update the OS you should be able to use it. It offers a lot of control over your copy, and gives you the option to create bootable copies – in other words, you should theoretically have the ability to simply swap your backup drive into place as your main drive, and carry on. It also has NetBoot configuration.

SuperDuper!

Shareware - US$28

Though it's a bit more expensive, SuperDuper! is worth the investment if you're paranoid about keeping your data safe. The program gives you the option to erase the target drive and do a clean backup, or to do a "smart backup," where new files are added to the backup and files you've since trashed are deleted from the backup. While I typically prefer saving to an external hard drive that's connected to the machine in question, SuperDuper! also gives the option of saving over the network (to a compressed disk image instead of the typical bootable full-drive backup).

By Sean Carruthers

Backup media

One regular question when it comes to backing up your files is whether to use burnable media (CDs or DVDs) or an external hard drive. The answer will largely depend on how much data you want to back up.

If you're planning to simply back up your important documents and a handful of photos, you may well be able to fit everything into the 650 megabytes found on a typical CD, or the 4.7 gigabytes found on a typical single-layer DVD. Just remember that if you have more data than that, you'll have to spend time burning multiple disks, and unless you have burning software that allows you to span discs, you may have to separate the files manually into disc-sized batches.

I'm personally a big fan of external hard drives for backing up my main drive. So long as the external drive is at least the same size as your internal drive, the process should be fairly easy if you're using reliable backup software like SuperDuper!. The only thing is: don't cheap out on the drive, because you want a reliable drive for your backup drive. (A 200 GB external drive is now about $200 for a decent brand name, but you can often find 300 GB drives for only a few dollars more if you scout around.)

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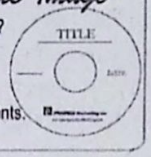

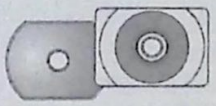

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One screen for work and play

The hunt for a hybrid LCD

HUB goes in search of screens equipped to serve as both PC monitors and all-purpose television displays

A growing number of technologically-savvy consumers are blurring the line between their home offices and living rooms by setting up spaces in which the technologies driving both work and entertainment activities converge. The key to these multipurpose rooms is a display capable of functioning as both a PC monitor and a television.

LCD, with its high brightness, resistance to burn-in, and fixed pixel format, has already proven itself in both the office and the living room, making it the obvious choice for a hybrid screen. But finding the right LCD can be tricky.

LCD monitors designed to function as PC displays often lack important features found in televisions. For starters, they typically have just a VGA or DVI jack, making it challenging to hook up devices with HDMI, component, composite, S-video, or coaxial outputs. Built-in speakers are also uncommon in PC LCDs, which means you'll need either a stereo or a set of external amplified speakers for audio. Plus, most PC panels still have 4:3 aspect ratios, making them less than perfect for viewing movies and console games designed for 16:9 (widescreen) displays.

PC monitors also tend to come up wanting in video picture quality. Many LCD televisions are equipped with video-enhancing technologies less common in PC monitors, such as 2:3 pull-down, a feature that greatly improves the quality of video sourced from film. They often have other advantages over PC panels as well, including a superior colour gamut, greater contrast ratios, and deeper blacks.

And, of course, LCD televisions are generally a bit easier on the eyes. While those ugly beige CRT boxes are (nearly) a thing of the past, manufacturers of most modern PC panels still seem to value function over form, putting to market LCDs in plain black plastic cases with little panache. Many televisions, on the other hand, are stunning examples of industrial design perfectly suited for chic living spaces, such as Sony's high-end Bravia sets (which have floating glass plates and interchangeable coloured bezels) and Samsung's wineglass-inspired LCDs (which sport white or black glossy shells that form a smooth case around the whole of the panel).

Dell 2407FPW 24

After all of this talk of the superiority of LCD televisions, one might be tempted to ask if there is anything that an LCD PC monitor does better than a television. The answer is a qualified yes. PC monitors are optimized to display crisp, clear text from a distance of less than a metre, a feat accomplished by delivering high resolutions in small screen sizes. Try viewing text on a standard 40-inch HDTV

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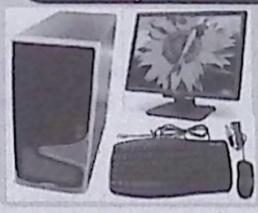

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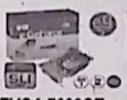

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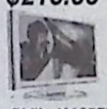

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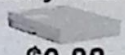

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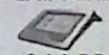

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Sharp AQUOS LC-37D90U

LCD television from less than eight feet and you run the risk of making out individual pixels and giving yourself moderate eye strain. Plus, many LCD televisions aren't equipped with VGA or DVI inputs, making it difficult to even connect them to a PC.

So the trick is to find either a PC monitor with a bevy of television-like features or a television with a high resolution relative to its size and at least one PC input (preferably DVI). To help you get started, here are three screens that meet these criteria.

Dell 2407FPW 24-inch LCD - $899

This display from Dell is a PC monitor that can actually connect with components other than just a computer. In addition to its VGA and DVI ports, it has composite, S-video and component connectors. It also has a resolution that exceeds 1080p requirements. It's a good match for college students who want their PC display to moonlight as a screen for watching movies and playing console games. On the downside, no speakers are attached, which means users will need to connect their non-PC components to another audio output source. Also, the lack of a coaxial input means that a cable TV feed will need to be routed through either a set top box or a PC with a tuner card.

ViewSonic N2751w 27-inch LCD - $1,059

ViewSonic's N2751w provides three more inches of real estate than the Dell, as well as a pair of speakers and HDMI and coaxial inputs. However, you'll be taking a significant loss in resolution; it tops out at 1366x768—currently the widely accepted standard for high-definition movies and games, but a bit hard on the eyes when it comes displaying text at short viewing distances. The lower number of pixels means this set is best used on a deep desk to ensure you're far enough away from the screen to avoid experiencing the screen door effect (lines between pixels) or in a smallish living room.

Sharp AQUOS LC-37D90U 37-inch LCD - $2,699

This set from Sharp is pricey, but it does everything required of a hybrid. It has a DVI PC input capable of accepting a 1920x1080 PC signal as well as two HDMI inputs for non-PC components with HD video output. The end result is stunning clarity in movies, PC and console video games, and any PC application you care to name. Plus, it has all of the features one would expect of a high-end television, including a panel backlight that brightens and dims in accordance with the room's ambient lighting and a wide selection of precise picture modification controls. In short, you won't find a better set to meet your combined PC and home entertainment viewing needs—at least not at this size and price.

By Chad Sapieha

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Intel 1.88G(E6300)	$735
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Intel 2.4G (E6600)	$888
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AMD Dual Core Am2 3800/4200/4600/5200	169/205/255/349
AMD (939)3200/4600x2	89/289
Celeron 2.5/3.0/3.3G	64/70/89
Intel LGA775 Dual-Core 2.8/3.0/3.4G	119/166/192
Intel Core 2 Duo E6300/6400/6600/6700	212/253/353/585

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nVidia 7600GS/6200 256M AGP	159/72
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nVidia 7300GS/7600GS/7900GS 256M PCI-E	79/139/219
nVidia 7300GT/7950GT(512m) PCI-EX	139/315
nVidia 8800GTS/8800GTX PCI-EX	539/719
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ATI AIW 2006ED/X800XL/X1900 256M PCI-E	162/219/269
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ATI Radeon X1950XTX/X1800GTO2/X1600Pr 512M PCI-E	439/289/139
ATI Fire-GL V3100/3400128M PCI Express	209/329
MSI /ASUS TV Tuner Capture Card/USB External	49/49/69
WEB Cam/Logitech web-cam	16/29

Hard Drives

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300/400G/500G	109/142/218
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SATAII 300/400G/500/750G	114/150/199/389
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ASUS A8V-VM/K8V-MX	69/69
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Altec Lansing 2321(2.1)GTS5051(5.1)Gaming audio(2.1)	45/139/59

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Modems/Networking

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D-Link wireless 54MB PCI/PCMCIA	49/49
D-Link DI-604/524P 4 Port Router	39/59
Linksys Wireless G Router WRT54GR	66
Linksys 54G WLS PCI/PCMCIA	65/65
USB Wireless G Adaptor	24
Network Cable Assembly 15/30/50ft	5/11/15

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HP 1022N/NW/1320N/NW	329/435/569/639
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Samsung Laser ML1610*/Canon MF3240(Multi)	$69/248

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Acer AL1916WAB/AL2017/2416WD	216/289/789
ViewSonic LCD VP2030B/VP920B/VX2025WM	499/319/368
ViewSonic 19" LCD VA912WB/VX922/VG2021M	249/319/299
ViewSonic N2751W LCD TV/VX2235WM(5ms)	789/439

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ASUS Z35F D-Core1.8 G/512MB/120GB/13"/Bluetooth/DVD-RW/wireless(4.3lbs).....$1199
Toshiba Satellite A100-TA7 T5500 1.66G/2.0G/120G HD/15.4"WXGA/DVD-RW/802G/XP-MCE.....$1259
Toshiba Satellite A100-TA4 Core Duo 1.6G/1.0G/120G/DVD-RW/15.4"Screen/Wireless G/XP-MCE.....$989

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Palm Tungsten E2 / T/X HNDH WIFI Bluetooth	$219/319
ASUS Mypal A636N W/GPS / HP iPAQ 6515 w/GPS	599/559
Canon A430(4M)/A530(5M)/ZR500	$179/245/349
Sony DSC-S500(6M)/W70 (7M)/T10 (7M)	$195/315/399
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Hear Ye, Hear Ye!

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CAL'S

Partying with Pearl

A Blackberry for work and play

The Pearl is a thoroughly modern smartphone that's substantially smaller than any previous Blackberry. It combines the functions of a phone (with speakerphone and voice dialling), 1.3 megapixel digital still camera, Personal Information Manager, wireless Internet terminal and media player (music, photos and video). It's Bluetooth-enabled and also has a miniSD card slot for gigabytes of storage. There's of course that signature Blackberry messaging system, engaging and even addictive to the point that it's often called Crackberry.

Colourful icons on the Pearl's screen represent the various functions. A pea-size trackball (that glows pearly white when illuminated) replaces the thumbwheel as the main navigation tool, and it works quite well, allowing you to navigate up-down as well as left-right.

Built-in Bluetooth allows you to use the Pearl with a wireless headset. There is some chatter on the net about tweaking the Stowaway Shasta Bluetooth keyboard so that it works with the Pearl. The Shasta might be a worthwhile pack-along because the Pearl's keyboard definitely favours phone dialling, and with just 20 alphanumeric keys, text inputting is compromised – although not as much as you might expect, thanks to a predictive text system called SureType.

A qwerty layout is mapped on the Pearl keypad, but most of the keys hold two letters. SureType tries to figure which of the two letters you want when you hit a key, and updates its predictions with each key you hit. According to RIM, the Pearl recognizes about 35,000 words, and it learns as you type. I was initially very leery of the system, but the more I use it, the more I like it. When it predicts correctly, my impression is that text input is at least as fast as with a thumb board. The main handicap is that sometimes the prediction goes from right to wrong in a single stroke, so you need to keep an eye on the screen as you type.

A single mini USB port doubles for datacomm and charging. When you connect the phone to a computer, you have the option of treating it as a flash memory device, plus while connected the phone's Lithium Ion battery is being charged too. Yay, one less AC adapter to throw into the travel bag.

At this point, Pearl works only on GSM networks and my subscription is with Rogers. The quad-band phone is ready for use in North America, Asia and Europe and is also EDGE-enabled. EDGE is a data enhancement to GPRS. Datacomm on GPRS is about as good as a landline modem, around 56 Kbps, but Rogers states EDGE throughput of up to 150 Kbps, nearly triple GPRS.

Internet access from the Pearl is not unlike the always-connected experience with broadband, albeit slower – just point the browser to a URL and away you go. The last time I tried surfing with a phone was about three years ago with a first-generation monochrome Treo – neither the networks nor the devices were ready for prime time. Today, the experience is pretty good.

Rogers has a created a handheld portal and has also bookmarked some sites optimized for the small screen. These include Google, Yahoo, CBC, the Globe and Mail, 411, The Weather Network, entertainment sites, etc. Some sites work better on the small screen than others, but all of the ones I tried are reasonably accessible.

The Pearl compensates for its limited screen real estate (the screen is about 38 x 40 mm) with very good display quality (240 x 260 pixels and 65K colours), so even small thin text is quite readable. Although I haven't tried to use it this way yet, the Pearl can also be used as a modem. I found a thread on a Mac site with instructions on how to set up the Pearl as a Bluetooth modem under OSX.

You won't get Blackberry PIM software to load onto your computer. Instead, the Pearl synchronizes with existing organizers like Outlook and Act and corporate systems like Exchange Server or Lotus Notes using a utility called the Desktop Manager. A utility also lets you import contact, calendar and schedule information from other organizers like Palm. For Mac users, PocketMac for Blackberry works with iCal and Address Book as well as other Mac organizers like Entourage.

One of the big unknowns for me at this point is the cost of being constantly connected. Pricing for the data portion ranges from $25 a month to $100 a month, and you can get other plans that combine the voice and data portions.

By David Tanaka

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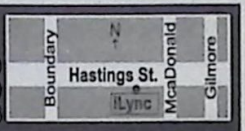

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Living with Linux

Looking at Apps

Linux offers so many applications it can be overwhelming. This month. we'll take a quick look at some of the major desktop applications, especially those that would interest anyone coming to Linux from a Windows environment. The apps listed here are all installed by default in Ubuntu Linux.

Office Apps

Everyone needs a word processor, spreadsheet and presentation program. In the Open Source world, nothing beats Open Office as a complete office suite. OO Write looks and operates much like MS Word, OO Calc resembles MS Excel, and OO Impress does slide shows and presentations in the manner of MS Powerpoint. These apps can import and export to MS formats. Impress can export to Powerpoint or to Flash format.

Photo Editing

Nearly everyone is a photographer these days, whether using a cell-phone camera or a sophisticated DSLR. For touching up digital photos and getting them ready to post to websites or to a printer, Linux offers GIMP, an advanced photo editing app that offers features similar to Adobe Photoshop. The GIMP can also be used to create digital art and graphics. It has a funny name, and a somewhat odd interface, but as Han Solo said, "She's got it where it counts, kid."

Email/Calendaring

Ubuntu Linux installs an app called Evolution for Email and Calendaring. It's a very attractive product and can be configured to pick up webmail, such as Gmail or Hotmail. For those who use Palm organizers, it can sync calendaring data.

Multimedia

It's a multimedia universe and everyone wants to listen to their MP3 files, watch DVDs and rip CDs to sound files. Ubuntu Linux supplies all the basics for multimedia. The main multimedia player is Rhythmbox, which can play sound files and subscribe to podcasts.

Messaging and VOIP

Instant messaging is a way of life for many users and Linux supplies a fine IM client called Gaim. It supports AIM/ICQ, MSN, Yahoo, IRC, Jabber, Sametime and Groupwise. Gaim users can log in to multiple accounts on multiple IM networks simultaneously. For VoIP, Ubuntu supplies the sophisticated Ekiga Softphone application. It uses the standard SIP protocol, and if you don't already have a SIP account, you can set up one free on Ekiga.net.

By Gene Wilburn

Gene Wilburn is a writer/photographer living in Port Credit, Ontario. He can be reached at gene@wilburn.ca. Visit Living with Linux at living-with-linux.blogspot.com.

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Editing Elementals and Much More

Adobe Premiere Elements 3.0

When we reviewed the Adobe Production Suite, we found there was just so much in the program that its strength was in some way its weakness. It's a powerful, yet pricey, package. We voiced the hope that Adobe would target a different market sweet spot. Happily, it has now done so.

Premiere Elements 3.0 comes with enough added new features and enhanced functions to make it just about the best package available for home-based digital imaging creation, production and delivery.

If you want, it's two simple clicks to capture video from a Mini DV camcorder and then to burn it on a DVD, complete with menu and scene index. On the other hand, you can click to your heart's delight and edit high definition video with creativity and sophistication, adding effects, titles and soundtracks to your HD masterpiece. Create and view videos in the normal TV ratio (4:3) or in the newer widescreen (16:9) format. As well, a single click converts video to NTSC or PAL for that worldwide audience.

What's really cool in the new PE are features like HDV capture and editing in its native, widescreen high-res format. PE3 also has expanded its export or output options, letting you send edited programs not only to videotape, but DVD, hard drive and even portable devices.

The new stop motion tool is great for making animated sequences and "clay-mation" or "time-lapse" videos. Capturing through a webcam (also newly supported in PE3) or camcorder, you can create custom animations easily using the "Onion Skin" command.

Scene I: Getting around the user interface

The program opens into a new and completely customizable GUI, with resizable and scalable windows, drag-and-drop positioning of key work areas and command menus, as well as other user-preferred settings.

Being able to zoom in on specific work areas means you can manage the editing environment more productively, keeping clutter or confusion to a minimum – there's no more hunting around and clicking to open and close unwanted panels.

Front and centre in the UI is a new Monitor window, in which basic editing techniques can be easily executed. It's also where video clips and special

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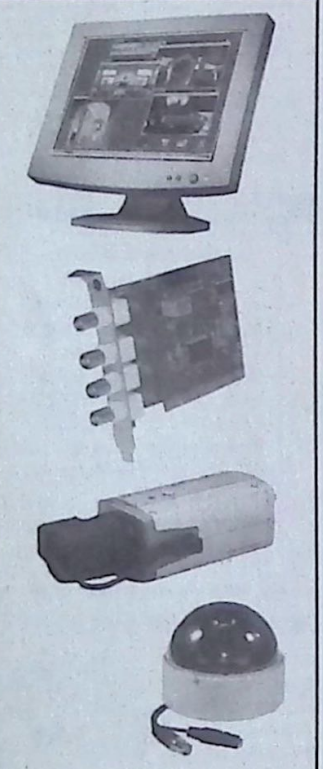

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effects (including picture-in-picture, scene transition and text titles) can be previewed. Familiar tape-transport controls (stop, pause, forward, rewind, etc.), along with program time and other clip properties, are displayed here.

To the right of the Monitor window is the Media work area, from which media assets like audio and video clips are accessed. You can import media directly from attached camcorders (be they tape, hard drive or memory card based), VTRs, DVDs, card readers, even compatible mobile phones. Of course, media already on your computer can be included, as well as assets created in other programs (Photoshop is a drop-down media source choice).

Simply click on the Camera icon for importing video from a camcorder, or select Get Media from... to select from other devices, sources or file folders.

At the left of the Monitor window is the Properties panel, where you can see, change and reproduce the filters and effects you may have applied to a specific clip. Found here are commands for opacity, position, rotation and scale, and for moving images, graphics and text around the screen over time with keyframes.

Many video editors (both the people and the programs) are accustomed to using the horizontal "Timeline" metaphor, where video clips are represented graphically on separate "tracks." Timeline editing is often preferred when precise control over clips, timing, positioning and sequencing are desired, and PE 3's Timeline is no different. With up to 99 audio and video tracks available, clips can be positioned using clock time or visual cues. Split edits (where either the audio or video from a particular clip is split apart, then re-combined with video or audio from another shot for dramatic or visual impact) are usually created in this view. But with one mouse click at the far right of the Timeline window, it switches to the new storyboard-like view, called the Sceneline. Here, thumbnail representations of captured media are more easily seen and clearly represented. Shots can be quickly dragged and dropped in an assembly-like fashion, or a number of shots can be group selected, dragged to the Sceneline and sequenced automatically in their chosen order.

Remove one scene, and the entire Sceneline adjusts itself, closing up the space and re-sequencing the program automatically for you. Transitions and titles can be added right from the Sceneline in a fashion that's more like making a slide show than a video program – it's that fast and easy.

Also displayed at the bottom of the Timeline/Sceneline window are specific tracks for adding externally sourced sounds, including music or voice narration (this is in addition to tracks reserved for audio from video). In fact, as with video, up to 99 audio tracks are available.

Added control over your soundtrack comes from audio adjustment tools (you can easily raise and lower the volume of existing audio and blend it with imported background music). Precise waveform controls are available for manipulating sound qualities and volumes, and a new function allows you to add spoken narration in real-time as you watch the video playing in the Monitor window. Editing to the beat of imported music is easy too, with the ability to mark or identify with a keystroke audio beats as places for video cuts.

Scene II: Display and delivery options abound

As easy as it is to get video into Premiere Elements and to manipulate it once it's there, it's just about as easy to get it out.

Of course, output to tape devices (Mini DV or VHS decks, for example) is supported. As well, a built-in DVD creation and burning engine lets you output to DVD, with menus created from scratch or customized from one of several templates (you have control over backgrounds, fonts, buttons, text and so on). Automatic scene index marks can be added, or you can create your own custom DVD chapter stops that link to specific video scenes.

The entire DVD build can be previewed (on your TV, which is a great bonus) before committing to it disc. The program supports single- or dual-layer DVDs, so you can accommodate lots of video material at the best compression quality, optimized for the available media.

Interesting, too, are the new output choices for online Web-based delivery, and even portable media devices. Contained on the drop-down Export menu are selections appropriate for mobile phones, video iPods and PlayStation Portables. Built-in compression tools will encode your video as Adobe Flash Video, or you can select QuickTime or Windows Media, as well.

Adobe Premiere Elements 3 is available for Windows PCs only; it will take advantage of Dual Core and Hyper-Threading Technology processing, and works well with the latest Intel Pentium-based Windows XP systems.

Depending on your system, you may encounter somewhat long rendering times. For example, exporting a 10-12 minute video to MPEG-2 (DVD) format takes 20-25 minutes. That's a little slower than some other programs – but they do not have the many included features and options that Adobe is offering.

Nor are they available at the same bundled price – less than $150 (at press time, there was a manufacturer's rebate available, lowering the price some $30) for Premiere Elements 5 and Photoshop Elements 3.

If you're looking for a capable and accessible digital media manipulation package, the choice is elementary!

By Lee Rickwood

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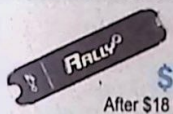

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Wireless Wonders

Latest Wi-Fi gadgets help cut the cord

Today's electronic gadgets aren't just getting smaller, more sophisticated and less expensive – they're also becoming wireless. It's about time.

Thanks to ubiquitous technologies such as Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and high-speed cellular networks, we can finally un-tether from our televisions, computers, video game systems and printers, while also remaining productive while traveling with a handful of wireless gadgets.

The following are just a few examples of new wireless wonders worth considering.

N is for Nice

First came 802.11b, then 802.11g and now it's 802.11n. If you can forgive the jargon soup, "n" is the latest in high-speed wireless networking, offering faster speeds over its "b" and "g" predecessors and with up to four times the range of wireless "g" (ideal for larger homes). The D-Link RangeBooster N Router (model DIR-625; $99.99) offers Wi-Fi speeds up to 300 megabits per second (with compatible wireless N cards snapped in laptops), plus it's backward-compatible with existing "b" and "g" gear and includes many security features.

Cable-free camera

Despite its small size, the Nikon Coolpix S6 ($399.99) has a few big features worth noticing, including integrated 802.11b/g to wirelessly upload photos to a PC or compatible printer when in a Wi-Fi hotspot. The 6 megapixel, 3x zoom camera also offers in-camera editing (to remove red-eye or brighten up dark shots, for example) and features face-recognition technology to automatically focus on a subject's face for a clear and crisp portrait. Another neat feature is the "Best Shot Selector," which identifies and saves the clearest photo from ten sequential shots.

Mobile media monster

Unlike the almighty iPod, the Archos 604 Wi-Fi ($459) is a wireless portable media player that – as you can guess by its name – includes built-in Wi-Fi to wirelessly download MP3 files, stream radio stations from the Web or access all your computer-based media wherever you may be in your home. This 30GB device also offers a widescreen 4.3-inch touch-screen display, support for multiple audio/video/photo file types, and with an optional DVR accessory, lets you even record directly from TV in high-quality MPEG-4 format.

Talk with your PC

A hot trend this year is wirelessly accessing all of the media that's stored on your computer – downloaded music and podcasts, digital photos and camcorder footage, TV shows and movies – from the comfort of your home theatre. So long as you have a wireless network (which you can set up for as low as $20 these days), connect one of these devices to your TV and then wirelessly pull all that wonderful media off your den computer: the D-Link MediaLounge DSM-520 ($299) or the Eureka LX350HD ($349), a smaller HD-capable unit from Zio Canada that also lets you snap-in an internal hard drive (sold separately) to bring all your media to a TV at a cottage or hotel room.

WAN-tastic

Trying to find a hotspot when traveling is so, well, 2006. Instead, Wide Area Network (WAN) cards snapped into the side of your laptop is a trendy alternative; log on anywhere you can get a cell phone connection, and even at high-speeds when in supported coverage areas. Sierra Wireless' AirCard 860 ($49.99 with a three-year Rogers Wireless term) is the first wireless modem for your laptop that works on the new High Speed Downlink Packet Access (HSDPA) service, a 3.5G wireless data network with speeds up to 1.8 Mbps. When not in a HSDPA coverage area, such as southern Ontario, the card operates on EDGE/GPRS wireless data networks.

LG Chocolate

Winner of two global design awards (the 2006 iF Design Award and Reddot Design Award), the LG Chocolate phone enjoys a dark, minimalist look with a touchpad that glows red when activated. Available through Telus Mobility and Rogers Wireless ($99.99 with a 3-year contract), this sleek slider phone also offers an integrated MP3/WMA music player, 1.3 megapixel camera (with built-in flash, zoom and up to one hour of video recording) and Bluetooth connectivity for supported wireless headsets. You can also send text messages with user-generated sound, photos or videos. Media is stored on removable and upgradeable microSD memory cards.

Cable-free prints

"All in one" printer, scanner and copiers have become popular space- and money-saving purchases for your home office, but the latest HP – the PhotoSmart C7180 ($499.99) – goes one step further by communicating over a wireless network. Thanks to its integrated 802.11g technology, you can keep this machine anywhere in the home, while the kids print their homework from multiple PCs. If desired, you can connect it to a wired router via Ethernet or to a PC with its USB 2.0 connection. It also offers various memory card slots so you can edit and print photos without a PC.

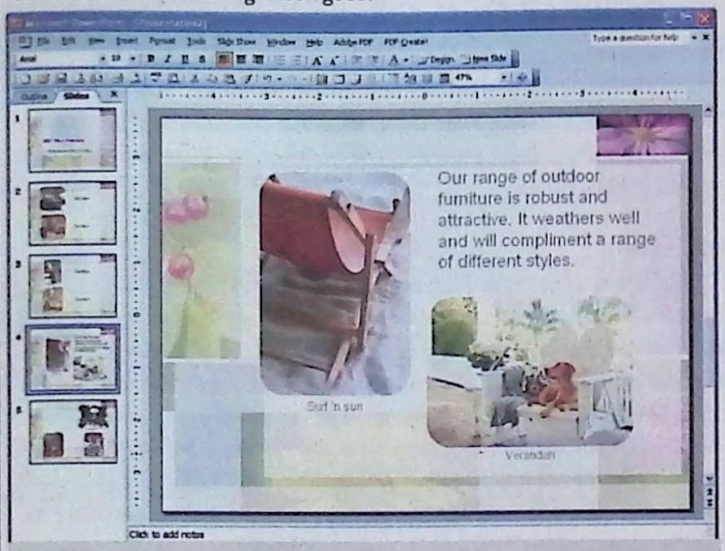
Anybody out there?

No need to boot up your computer to detect if there is a Wi-Fi signal in the area – the Kensington Wi-Fi Finder Plus ($20) is a keychain-sized wireless network sensor that can sniff out available 802.11b/g Wi-Fi networks (and Bluetooth-enabled devices and networks) with the press of a button; a red light means there isn't one available or it's a private network (requiring a security key and/or login password), while the green LED lights indicates signal strength. It also includes a built-in flashlight for added convenience. No software or computer required.

By Marc Saltzman

Making albums in PowerPoint

PowerPoint presentations are suited to a myriad of business applications. Part of the reason is that PowerPoint is so easy to use and presentations made with it look very neat. This makes PowerPoint an obvious choice when you need to create something that can be viewed on screen but don't want to invest hours in making it look good.



Once you've created the album you can then personalize it by adding text and moving items around.

The Photo Album Tool is built into PowerPoint 2002 and 2003. To get started, create a new presentation or open an existing one and choose Insert, Picture, New Photo Album. Start by selecting the images to include in the album. You can import these from your disk or download them directly into the Photo Album tool from your scanner or camera. In most cases, because you'll be getting them from your disk, open them in your image editing program first and then resize them and apply any fixes or effects. The PowerPoint photo album tool has limited editing options – while it can rotate and adjust contrast and brightness, it cannot do much more.

The default layout shows one picture on each slide, with the image being the size of the slide. To change the layout, choose an alternate option from the Picture layout options, which include one, two or four pictures per slide with or without a page title. To add frames to your images, set the frame shape from the Frame Shape list. Click Browse to select a design template to apply to the pages of your album.

To reorder the images in the album, click an image in the list and then click the up and down arrows to rearrange the images. To include text on the same page as the images, use the New Text Box option. An inserted text box is the same size as the image and takes the place of one of the photos, pushing the remaining photos back a page. So, if you need one text box per photo, alternate photos with text boxes through the list. You can have as many or as few text boxes as you like, and it's best to include them at this design stage so room is left for them on the final layout.

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If you select the Captions below ALL images checkbox, you'll get a small box appearing below each picture displaying the filename of the photo. While you may not want to display the filename, you may still want to enable this option so you can use the space provided for things like an item title.

When you have everything arranged, click the Create button to create it.

Check the album layout – you will find the photos arranged as you selected on the slides in the presentation. If you need to make major changes, choose Format, Photo Album to open the dialog again to make changes to the settings. If the design is good, then you can start customizing it. For example, if you added a caption to all images, click in the caption box and type a word or two to describe the image. Type more detailed pieces of text in the text boxes and format the text by selecting it and selecting a formatting option from the toolbar.

You can add other elements to your slides, such as title text and even clip art images or your company logo. You can also move and resize the photos and text boxes on the page. However, if you make changes such as moving or resizing an image, don't use the Format, Photo Album tool to make configuration changes or you'll lose all your other changes. If you need to add new photos to the slide show, either add them manually or create a new album with these photos and copy the slides into your existing album.

The Photo Album tool creates a regular PowerPoint presentation so you have all the options available that you'd have in any PowerPoint show, including the ability to change design templates, adding narration, music and transitions.

By Helen Bradley

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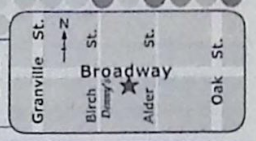

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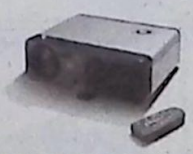

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Microsoft Flight Simulator X

The next best thing to being there

To fully enjoy the latest version of Microsoft's computer flight simulators, make sure you have lots of time to spare because you are going to spend hours and hours getting away from it all, living in an unbelievably realistic simulation of flight.

With Flight Simulator X, Microsoft has produced a program with an incredible amount of content. You will be able to land at or take off from 40 highly detailed airports where fuel trucks and luggage carts race all around you and yes, you will also see jetways being moved to connect with the Airbus you've just parked. But if all this activity makes you feel uncomfortable, don't worry: Microsoft is offering you 24,000 airports to choose from around the world.

Compared to Flight Simulator 2004, the terrain graphics have improved considerably, with high-resolution textures based on satellite photography being applied over most inhabited areas. High-resolution graphics are also used to show 38 cities in high detail. (Try buzzing the strip in Las Vegas.)

But the graphics are equally astounding when it comes to the cockpit and the instrument panel of each plane, particularly when those instruments behave like real ones.

It does take a while before one can really appreciate all the possibilities that have been made available: being able to look around the cockpit, to have a different view of the plane inside and out or to watch yourself fly as if you were in a spot plane or in an airport tower.

Sound quality has also advanced to a new level of realism: those jets do sound like jets and those propeller-driven planes sound like they do in real life.

But the biggest advance made by Microsoft's latest version is in the realism of the communications. The chatter between air traffic control and planes flying nearby is unbelievably realistic, sounding like what you hear in real life.

Flight Simulator X is composed of four main parts: Free flight, Missions, Multiplayer and Learning Center. The learning center, as the name suggests, helps new users familiarize themselves with the main functions, such as controlling the engine, or gives basic explanations of concepts like VORs. Free Flight lets you pick the airport and the plane of your choice and enjoy flying without having to follow radio procedures if you don't want to. Missions are a bit more complex. There are 50 of them, starting with 10 tutorials teaching you how to fly. If you've never piloted a plane before, this is the place to start.

The other missions are divided into four categories applying to beginner, intermediate, advanced and expert pilots and they are highly entertaining, even exciting.

Is the program bug-free? No, and Microsoft knows it, promising an update pretty soon. But one of the most talked about problems is the limited frame rate. On most computers, all you get is 8-14 frames per second, which is half the frame rate of the previous flight simulator. That can be annoying, but unless you are prepared to upgrade to higher-end hardware, you'll have to live with it.

Minimum system requirements

These minimum requirements will force you to set the performance options fairly low. Still, you will be able to enjoy flying 24 types of planes (in the deluxe version), ranging from an ultra light to a Boeing 747-400.

- Windows XP SP2 / Windows Vista
- Processor: 1.0 GHz
- RAM: Windows XP SP2 - 256MB, Windows Vista – 512MB
- Hard Drive: 14GB
- Video Card: 32MB DirectX 9 compatible
- Other: DX9 hardware compatibility and audio board with speakers and/or headphones
- Online/Multiplayer Requirements: 56.6 kbps or better for online play

By André Salwyn

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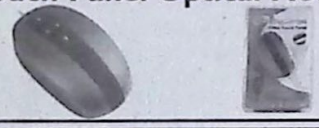

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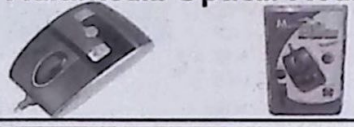

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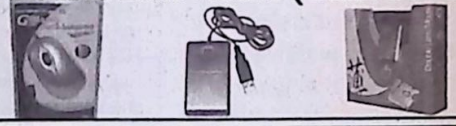

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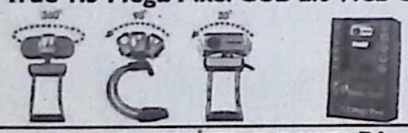

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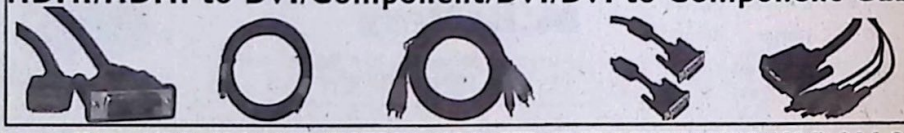

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Racing Pedals for the Well-Heeled

VPP Pedalset Professional System

In most PC sports genres, the player views the proceedings and delivers input from a godlike third-person perspective above or to the side of the action. Automobile racing is quite a bit different in that it allows participants to effectively become one with the virtual competitor. It is because of this first-person perspective and the hypersensitive, hyper-realistic demands of top titles such as NASCAR Racing and GTR2 that the quality and performance of a racing controller is so critical.

Invariably, serious racers turn to a wheel and pedal set, where they can do all the things they can do in a real car and perhaps a little bit more. Yet almost without exception, mass-market driving systems tend to neglect what goes on below the desk. Though their steering wheels are generally satisfactory, their pedal units generally feel cheap, uncomfortable, potentially breakable, too lightweight or a combination of the above. And that's where VirtualMotorsports' Virtual Performance Parts Pedalset Professional System (www.vmracingsystems.com) comes in.

At a hyperventilation-inducing price of $655 for a two-pedal (gas and brake) system and $721 for a three-pedal (gas, brake and clutch) unit, the VPP concept is clearly too rich for casual gamers or anyone who still owes that much on their current PC. However, if you're a hardcore PC driver who lives and breathes the sport or perhaps competes regularly in an online racing league, and you have both the funds and the necessary floor space, the VPP Pedalset might just be the tool to push you over the top.

I had a chance to audition the three-pedal version of the system, and soon came to realize that a high-end setup doesn't necessarily equate with an easy or convenient set up. The VPP Pedalset is a large and hefty affair, tipping the scales at nearly 11 kilograms and stretching out 24 inches front to back. Granted, some of that length is courtesy of the detachable non-skid pads that protrude nearly a foot from the backside of the unit, but you'll need those pads if you don't want the entire device to slide forward in the heat of action.

If one word sums up the VPP Pedalset's aesthetic value, that word is "industrial." Built almost completely of metal and evidently fabricated in the same factory responsible for Terminator robots, the unit may be the most beautifully testosterone-fueled computer peripheral ever built.

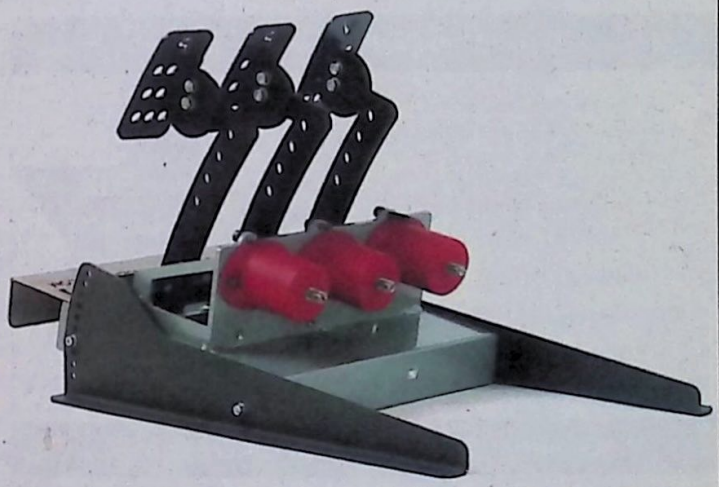
Moreover, its skeletal framework isn't covered up in a prettified plastic housing. Instead, its innards are proudly laid bare so users can both appreciate the impressive build quality and tinker away to their heart's content. You see, German manufacturer Virtual Performance Parts has designed its product for maximum customization. Adjusting the angle or the height of the pedal pads, the amount of travel or the tension is simply a matter of loosening and/or tightening various machine screws. We were initially disappointed to see just a one-inch gap between each of the three pedals, but our feelings changed substantially when we noticed we could alter that too.

Yet even after you've tweaked, you may not be entirely happy with the results. The VPP Pedalset forces you into a low-slung, legs-straight-out posture that wonderfully mimics the ergonomics of a real-life formula racecar but may not suit some computer gaming setups. Furthermore, if your chair is on wheels, chances are you'll involuntarily roll backwards as you press forward on the pedals.

Fortunately, VirtualMotorsports has a solution. It's called the VPP Racing Rack Basic, another all-metal contraption that lies on the floor and connects the pedal unit (or most other pedal units, for that matter) to any standard, wheeled office chair. It's a great idea that effectively puts an end to unwanted chair travel (long the bane of many a PC driver), though the $221 price tag is likely too steep for some.

As instructed, we connected the VPP Pedalset directly to one of our USB ports, plugged a Logitech Momo Force steering wheel to another, and were off to the races, so to speak. The unit performed well during all conditions, delivering smooth action and that immeasurable sensation that we were that much closer to being in a real cockpit.

Long-term durability is tough to gauge during short-term testing, but

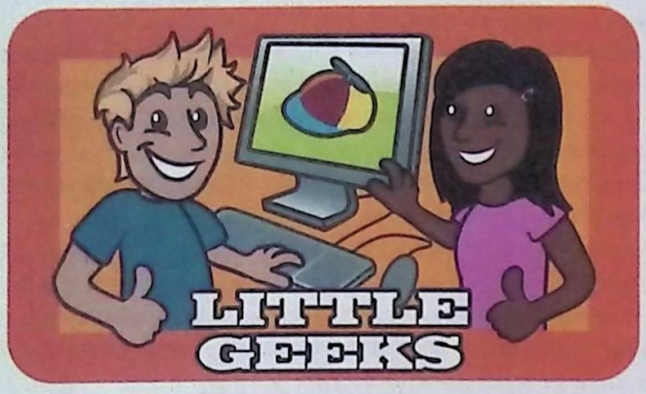


we'd put our money on an all-metal system over plastic pedals any day of the week. That said, we have moderate concern about the potential longevity of the pliable rubber stoppers that reside behind each of the pedals, but they look to be the most affordable and readily replaceable parts in the entire system. Furthermore, VirtualMotorsports, which warranties the system for three years (two years on electronics) claims it's never had a problem with them.

Prospective customers should remember that other high-end pedal options do exist, most notably Extreme Competition Controls' slightly smaller, but no less solid all-metal Trackstar 6000 (www.ecci.net) and the plastic-coated, but highly regarded Thomas Enterprises Evolution pedals (http://www.thomas-superwheel.com/). Logitech is also making waves with its new G25 wheel and pedal combo, a mass-manufactured system that nevertheless features a high-quality wheel, stainless steel pedal pads, and a clutch.

Nevertheless, the VPP Pedalset is a sophisticated, built-like-a-tank, impress-your-friends addition to any driving rig. Granted, it's one of the most expensive PC pedal sets ever marketed in North America, but every indication is that it—and its industrial standard potentiometers— will be purring along nicely well into the next decade and quite possibly beyond.

By Gord Goble



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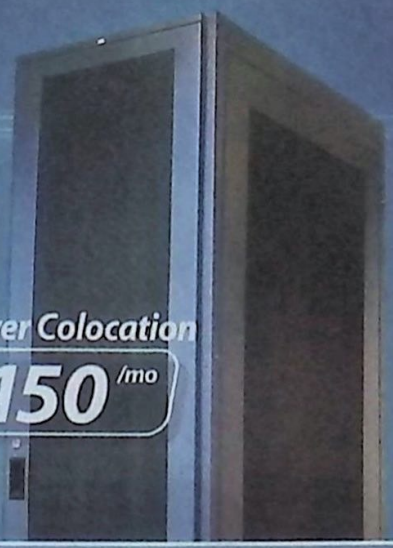

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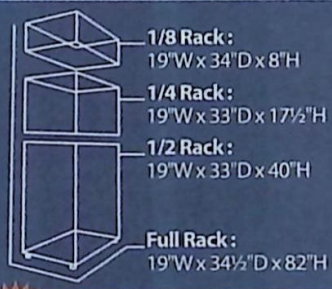

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